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Carolyn W. Graham

Gwendolyn T. Sorell

Marilyn J. Montgomery

*George Fox University*, [mmontgomery@georgefox.edu](mailto:mmontgomery@georgefox.edu)

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# Role-Related Identity Structure in Adult Women

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## Abstract

This study explored women's role-related identity structures through in-depth interviews with 60 employed and stay-at-home women married to professional men. The employment, wife, mother, and homemaking roles of these women were examined to understand how married women integrate employment and family roles (i.e., wife, mother, and homemaking roles) within their identity. The women arranged the structure of their multiple roles in a variety of ways: Most structured their roles hierarchically, others intertwined several roles, some perceived their roles as equally important, a few indicated that they were "more than" their roles, and a small group of women were actively reworking their role-related identity structure. The structures observed are interpreted as representing a range of personal settlements with contemporary adult gender-role-related societal expectations.

The adult task of structuring and integrating multiple roles within a personal sense of identity is not a simple one. Each adult must strive to balance commitments to different aspects of his or her identity to maintain the continuity and consistency that characterizes overall identity (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986). This struggle to derive and maintain a sense of self or identity begins early in life, becomes a foreground issue during adolescence and continues throughout adulthood (Erikson, 1980; Josselson, 1987, 1996; Kroger & Green, 1996; Levinson, 1996; Waterman, 1982).

For contemporary women, constructing and maintaining a sense of personal identity takes place with a backdrop of societal expectations that hold women responsible for caring for home and family, while also conveying that women are not capable of successfully negotiating both work and family roles (i.e., wife, mother, and homemaking; Barnett & Hyde, 2001). At the same time, historical change has contributed to a growing expectation that women should have competitive and successful careers and should simultaneously be nurturing wives, mothers, and homemakers (Jacobs & Gerson, 2001). These conflicting gender role expectations constitute an integral part of identity and contribute significantly to the social behavior of contemporary women (Peterson, 2000; Tang & Tang, 2001). The conflict within these current cultural prescriptions for women has the potential to create role strain for women who must juggle multiple personal identities constructed within contexts of employment, partnership, and motherhood (cf., Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Collins, 2001; Pleck, 1980). However, little is known about how women in these contexts structure and integrate the multiple role commitments that contribute to a personal sense of identity (Bateson, 1989). Researchers have examined various aspects of work and family roles and women's experiences, such as role enhancement (Greenhaus, 1988; Marks, 1977; Marks, Huston, Johnson, & MacDermid, 2001; Marks & MacDermid, 1996), role quality (Barnett, Brennan, & Marshall, 1994; Baruch & Barnett, 1986), and role strain or conflict (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1995; Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997; Greenhaus & Beutell 1985; Greenhaus et al., 2001; Pleck, 1980). Instead of looking at these aspects of roles in this study, we sought to understand the ways in which married women who differed in vocational status ordered and organized their commitments to compose and maintain a coherent a sense of self.

## WOMEN'S ROLE-RELATED IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Much of the research in recent years focusing on identity formation and maintenance has been conducted within the ego identity status framework conceptualized by Marcia (1993). For the most part, that research has explored adolescent ego identity formation processes, variations in degrees of identity exploration and commitment and correlates of these variations. This research is not totally disconnected from Marcia's conceptualization of ego identity status; indeed, the interview schedule employed in data collection is an adaptation of Whitbourne's (1986) protocol designed to examine ego identity processes in adulthood. However, the maintenance and transformation of identity in the adult years involve psychosocial constraints and possibilities that are significantly more differentiated and informed by deeper levels of personal and social experience than are the identity formation processes of adolescence. The complexity of these identity processes is, in our view, more adequately captured by Côté and Levine's (2002) elab-

oration of House's (1977) personality and social structure perspective (PSSP). This framework conceptually integrates the psychological and sociological components of an individual sense of identity in a manner congruent with Erikson's use of the term *psychosocial*. The research reported here does not examine all components of the PSSP model presented by Côté and Levine (2002). However, the specificity of model components enables clear identification and definition of those identity components that are targeted by the research.

As used in this report, the term *identity* refers to the conscious awareness of knowing who one is. This process of self-definition involves simultaneously maintaining the continuity of one's own character and some degree of ideological and behavioral congruence with the ideals of the social group in which one lives (Erikson, 1980). One's sense of identity is composed of three inter-related and interacting components: *ego identity*, *personal identity*, and *social identity* (Côté & Levine, 2002). *Ego identity* is the consistent, fundamental core sense of self that is maintained across time. It is ego identity that determines how a life experience is integrated into one's overall sense of identity. *Personal identity* consists of an individual's goals, values, beliefs, and roles, as these develop through social interactions and life experiences. *Social identity* involves one's fit and position within a society, particularly the roles that one chooses for personal investment (Côté & Levine, 2002; Erikson, 1980).

*Role-related identity* is the portion of a personal identity that interacts with the social identity domain (Côté & Levine, 2002). This interaction between a person's personal and social identities is associated with expectations for social role adoption and performance and is a component of the more global identity construct (Josselson, 1987; Schwartz, 2001; Stryker, 1968). A person's sense of personal identity consists, in part, of a number of role-related identities that are connected to role relationships (Stryker, 1968; Wiley, 1991). Thus, role-related identity is that part of a person's identity that enables assessment of actions within roles. These assessments occur through self-monitoring of the consistency of behaviors and self-expectations within roles (Erikson, 1980).

The complexity of contemporary women's identity formation and maintenance tasks depends in part on their vocational choices. Full-time homemakers, although unencumbered with the roles of the work-family interface, must integrate within their identities their family roles, their own and societal evaluations of their family role performances, and the growing expectation that women will be employed. Employed, married women who are financially unable to stay at home full-time or who prefer to be employed outside their homes must integrate into their personal identities their employment-related roles, societal expectations of women as family managers, and their own and society's evaluations of their employment and family role performances. Examining role-related identity among women who differ in employment status may contribute to our understanding of how contemporary women committed to multiple roles structure their personal identities and

resolve for themselves the contradictory societal expectations associated with these roles.

## THEORY AND RESEARCH ON WOMEN'S ROLE STRUCTURES AND ROLE-RELATED IDENTITY

Structural theoretical perspectives have predominated investigations of role-related identity construction. According to structural perspectives, role-related identities are organized into an integrated hierarchical system that represents the self (Stryker, 1968). This hierarchical system or hierarchy of salience is organized by the relative importance placed on the various roles adopted by the individual. Research deriving from this theoretical framework asks participants to order their roles from *most important* to *least important* (e.g., Stryker & Serpe, 1994; Thoits, 1992). However, because role-related identity studies from a structural perspective only offer respondents an opportunity to indicate a hierarchically organized identity structure, the findings of these studies ignore the possibility that some women organize their identities in another fashion. Furthermore, studies based on structuralist perspectives typically have focused on delineating the most prevalent salient role for the entire sample rather than examining individuals' configurations of role priorities (Thoits, 1992). The resulting picture of women managing their investments in multiple roles and complex identities by prioritizing the relative importance of these roles has likely been an oversimplification. Therefore, although the hierarchical structuralist perspective, when paired with identity theory, suggests a general approach to determining how women organize their role-related work and family identity investments, it is not in itself sufficient.

Assessing role-related identity with the preconceived idea that everyone experiences their roles as discrete, separate, and vertically arranged ignores the possibility of other identity organizations. The expansionist perspective is based on the idea that the engagement and investment in multiple roles can be beneficial to relationships and well-being when positive role quality is experienced (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Within facilitative contexts, an individual can also experience favorable outcomes when he or she is committed to multiple roles (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). When applying the expansionist perspective to role-related identity structures, it may be found that lateral development or multiple role structuring provides a way for an individual to integrate various aspects of role-related experience. Research indicates that some people do organize their role-related identity in a lateral manner, giving equal importance to two or more roles (Adelmann, 1993). Using a questionnaire that assessed whether participants arranged their roles hierarchically or laterally, Marks and MacDermid (1996) found evidence for both types of identity structure. In addition, they found evidence for identity structures that combined hierarchical and lateral organizations.

Finally, other researchers have asserted that some (perhaps more psychosocially mature) individuals emphasize ego identity rather than role-related personal identity in their identity structures (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Fowler, 1976; Horiuchi, 1993; Kegan, 1982; Labouvie-Vief, Chiodo, Goguen, Diehl & Orwoll, 1995). These individuals are suggested to have shifted from an identity deriving from embeddedness within social expectations, roles and relationships with others to an identity differentiating self from the influences of relationships and social institutions. These adults structure their sense of self or identity autonomously, using internal descriptions and processes in defining self, rather than looking to social expectations and institutional standards for guidance. These individuals define themselves not by what they do or the roles they occupy, but as *people* who have roles to perform. Thus, some women may transcend social roles altogether in the construction of identity, particularly during the middle adult years (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Kegan, 1982; Labouvie-Vief et al., 1995).

In summary, theory and research suggest that women's identities may be organized: (a) hierarchically, in a role-related structure in which one role predominates and other roles are subordinate (subsequently referred to as a *hierarchical* structure); (b) laterally, in a role-related structure in which multiple equally important roles are integrated and balanced (subsequently referred to as a *holistic* structure); (c) laterally/hierarchically, in a structure in which two or more equally valued roles are given prominence over other hierarchically arranged roles (subsequently referred to as a *multirole* structure); or (d) transcendentally, in a structure in which personal identity, including role occupancy and role-related identity, is subordinate to a sense of ego identity and continuity across time and context (subsequently referred to as an *unembedded* structure).

In this study, we combined identity theory (Côté & Levine, 2002; Erikson, 1980) with structuralist and expansionist perspectives on role-related identity structure (e.g., Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Stryker, 1968) to form a framework for examining specific aspects of employed and stay-at-home women's ego identities as wives, mothers, homemakers, and waged workers. We included stay-at-home women in the sample because studies of role-related personal identity often focus on only career women. Using an in-depth, semistructured interview method that allowed women to describe themselves and their investments in their various roles without the imposition of an implicit measure-invoked identity structure, we sought to answer three questions: First, what role-related identity structures are characteristic of contemporary employed and stay-at-home married women? Second, do employed women and stay-at-home women differ in their role-related identity structures? Third, do employed women who have careers and women who are employed in noncareer positions differ in their identity structures? In the absence of empirical literature addressing these questions, we designed an exploratory descriptive study using qualitative analyses to compare these groups of women with respect to their role-related identity structures. Throughout this anal-

ysis, we focused on how women *organized* their roles psychologically, rather than on the similarity of specific content of role tasks in which women engaged.

## METHODS

### Participants

Participants were selected from the sample for the Adult Identity Development Project (AIDP), which surveyed and interviewed a homogeneous group of primarily Anglo-American middle-class adult women<sup>1</sup> (Sorell, Montgomery, & Busch-Rossnagel, 1997). A snowball sampling technique was used in obtaining respondents from Colorado, New York, and Texas. The only criterion for inclusion in the sample for the current study was, to establish equivalence of the groups, that the respondent be married to a man with an occupational rating of 7, 8, or 9, or “professional” on the Hollingshead Index (Hollingshead, 1975). This index provides an objective, albeit somewhat dated, method of distinguishing people employed in positions that usually require specialized education and provide opportunities for advancement (a career ladder) from those who are employed in positions requiring little or no education beyond high school and offering, at best, limited opportunities for advancement. The ratings were used to establish a social status distinction between those classified as employed in career and noncareer positions, a distinction that often is not made in studies focusing on career salience.

Sixty women who completed interviews suitable for analysis were identified for inclusion in this study. The sample was divided into three groups according to the women’s vocational status: (a) career women having an occupational rating of 7, 8, or 9 on the Hollingshead index ( $n = 34$ ); (b) noncareer women having an occupational rating of less than 7 on the Hollingshead index ( $n = 14$ ); and (c) stay-at-home women who were not engaged in paid employment ( $n = 12$ ). The occupations of the career women included teacher, professor, librarian, attorney, pharmacist, and artist. The occupations of the noncareer women included student (undergraduate and graduate), clerical worker, secretary, dental assistant, and loan processor. All of the women in the sample had some college education. Table 1 indicates that there were few statistically significant differences among the subgroups included in the sample in terms of demographic variables.

### Measures

The AIDP used multiple methods of data collection. Demographic information was obtained through the use of a Respondent Data Sheet. All respondents partici-

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<sup>1</sup>The use of the term “women” in this study refers to middle-class Anglo-American women, who may not represent the experiences of women from other socioeconomic status and ethnic groups or both.

TABLE 1

Demographics of Career, Noncareer Employed, and Stay-At-Home Wives ( $N = 60$ )

|                                  | <i>Career</i> <sup>a</sup> | <i>Noncareer</i> <sup>b</sup> | <i>Stay-at-Home</i> <sup>c</sup> | <i>Total</i> |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|
| Age range in years               | 25–60                      | 23–58                         | 23–64                            | 23–64        |
| <i>Mean</i> age                  | 41.70*                     | 33.85*                        | 38.56                            | 39.33        |
| <i>SD</i>                        | 8.26                       | 9.99                          | 12.49                            | 9.82         |
| Length of marriage               | 1–39                       | 1–34                          | 3–42                             | 1–42         |
| <i>Mean</i> marriage length      | 15.88                      | 9.00                          | 16.18                            | 14.31        |
| <i>SD</i>                        | 9.66                       | 10.63                         | 12.91                            | 10.78        |
| Women's median income            | \$25–29,999                | \$10–14,999                   | \$0                              | \$20–24,999  |
| Spouses' median income           | \$30–34,999                | \$30–34,999                   | \$30–34,999                      | \$30–34,999  |
| Number of mothers                | 27 (79.4%)                 | 10 (71.4%)                    | 12 (100%)                        | 49 (82%)     |
| Oldest child's <i>Mean</i> age   | 16.24                      | 8.50                          | 13.27                            | 13.86        |
| <i>SD</i>                        | 11.94                      | 9.89                          | 12.92                            | 11.92        |
| Youngest child's <i>Mean</i> age | 10.38                      | 5.14                          | 6.18                             | 8.36         |
| <i>SD</i>                        | 10.83                      | 8.82                          | 8.22                             | 10.08        |

Note. <sup>a</sup> $n = 34$ . <sup>b</sup> $n = 14$ . <sup>c</sup> $n = 12$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

pated in a lengthy semistructured interview conducted by a trained interviewer, and the typed transcripts of the interviews provided data for qualitative analysis.

The interview, which was adapted from a schedule developed by Whitbourne (1986), included questions regarding the participant's perceptions and evaluations of herself in her family and employment roles, as a person of her age, and as a woman, as well as questions about her relationship with her husband and a specific significant friendship. Respondents also were given an opportunity to respond to questions about other areas of their lives that were important to them, such as religion, community or volunteer activities, hobbies, and as some respondents termed it, *myself*.

The questions were designed to probe two broad dimensions: *role salience* and *role flexibility*. Role salience questions included inquiries concerning the quality and intensity of the woman's motivation to engage in her various roles, the quality and intensity of affect associated with each role, and the effects of being in the role on the woman's self-evaluation (e.g., "What is important to you about being a wife/mother/homemaker/worker?"; "How do you feel about being a wife/mother/homemaker/worker?"; "What do you especially like/dislike about being a wife/mother/homemaker/worker?"; "How would your life be different if you were not a wife/mother/homemaker/worker?"). Role flexibility questions focused on consideration, evaluation, and implementation of alternative ways of



feeling and behaving in each role (e.g., “Have you ever considered other ways of behaving as a wife/mother/homemaker/worker?”; “What steps have you taken to implement the changes you are considering?”; “What changes do you think you might make in the future in your role as a wife/mother/homemaker/worker?”). The present analysis focused only on responses to the questions concerning the wife, mother, homemaker, and employment roles and was designed to determine the structure of each woman’s role-related identity.

## Procedure

The analysis in this study was grounded in the phenomenological tradition in examining interview responses of women concerning their perceptions and evaluations of themselves in their family and employment roles. The phenomenological analytical tradition focuses on discerning, from in-depth interviews, the meaning that individuals give to life experiences concerning specific phenomena (Creswell, 1998). The phenomena of interest in this study were women’s role-related identity structures.

Content analysis was used to determine the importance each respondent attached to her various roles and the manner in which she organized her role-related identity. Content analysis is a qualitative technique in which narratives are systematically classified into discrete categories; relationships of the categories can be evaluated through nonparametric statistics. The data represent the presence, intensity, and/or frequency of characteristics that can be used to describe a particular phenomenon (Shapiro & Markoff, 1997).

All interviews were evaluated by two trained raters. On the basis of the importance (motivational and affective quality and intensity) placed by respondents on their various roles and the impact of these roles on self-evaluation, the women were categorized by role-related identity structure, according to a written rating manual developed by the first author.<sup>2</sup> Reliability of ratings was established through a consensus procedure similar to the technique described by Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997). The use of consensus ratings reduces error due to rater leniency, lack of diligence, inability to differentiate between ratings, and restricted range of ratings (Kleiman, Lousbury, & Faley, 1987; Latham, Wexley, & Pursell, 1975; Tsui & Ohlott, 1988). Consensus rating also enables clarification in the definition of variables, which facilitates the differentiation of ratings and correction of misconceptions and encourages raters to be diligent in their ratings (Kleiman et al., 1987; Latham et al., 1975). However, there are weaknesses in this procedure, such as the possibility of a dominating personality persuading the rating. In our attempt to offset this weakness, strength of personality was considered in the selection and pairing of raters. Pairs of raters met weekly to determine which of their independently assigned ratings were the same and which were different. When ratings were

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<sup>2</sup>A copy of the rating manual is available from the first author.

different, raters discussed the responses in the interview that were used as a basis for their evaluations to come to a consensus on the rating. When an agreement was not reached, a third rater was used to determining the rating.

## RESULTS

Preliminary analyses were conducted to ascertain the equivalence of the groups of women compared in this study (see Table 1). In these and subsequent analyses, an alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

### Role-Related Identity Structure

Our first question asked what role-related identity structures are characteristic of contemporary employed and stay-at-home married women. Our analyses indicated that among the 60 women in this study, the four types of role-related identity structures identified in previous research—hierarchical, holistic, multirole, and unembedded—were found. In addition, a group of women in identity transition was identified. As detailed in Table 2, significantly more women were classified in the hierarchical role-related identity structure category than in the other categories  $\chi^2(4, N = 60) = 62.00, p < .001$ .

*Hierarchical role-related identity structure.* Thirty-six women (60%) were classified as having a hierarchical role-related identity structure, indicating that one role dominated others in definition of self. The statement of a departmental director exemplified those of many in the hierarchical role-related identity category:

I think it's important that I have a job that gives me a sense of identity, and it does ... I think [work] has a great deal [of an effect on how I see myself] ... I think that I'm happier with myself because of my work ... I'm always thinking about projects at work and ways to improve things and different areas we could explore. I think it influences

**TABLE 2**

Frequency of Role Identity Structure Categories ( $N = 60$ )

| Category            | Career <sup>a</sup> | Noncareer <sup>b</sup> | Stay-At-Home <sup>c</sup> | Total Sample |
|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| Hierarchical        | 21                  | 8                      | 7                         | 36 (60%)     |
| Holistic            | 3                   | 2                      | 1                         | 6 (10%)      |
| Unembedded          | 1                   | 0                      | 1                         | 2 (3.3%)     |
| Multirole           | 5                   | 2                      | 1                         | 8 (13.3%)    |
| Identity transition | 4                   | 2                      | 2                         | 8 (13.3%)    |

Note. <sup>a</sup> $n = 34$ . <sup>b</sup> $n = 14$ . <sup>c</sup> $n = 12$ .

other aspects of my life because it makes me feel more satisfied with myself and what I do.

A common characteristic of women with a hierarchical role-related identity structure was the degree of connectedness between roles. A schoolteacher whose primary role was mother described how this role affected other aspects of her identity: "I think definitely there's a lot of mother that comes out of me in my teaching. There's a lot of things that I feel very comfortable saying to kids that teachers that don't have children do not." Another woman stated that her wife role affected everything she did:

I think that I need to be in a permanent relationship ... It's hard to conceive of being alone and not having someone in that other role ... I think it affects it [how I see myself] totally. If I were not married, work would be different and home would be different. Everything would be different. [Being a wife] affects everything.

Other women, such as this counseling center director, organized their role-related identities in a hierarchical manner with less connection between role identities:

[My employment role is] where I am self-fulfilled, if that's possible ... [Homemaking] doesn't [fulfill me], other than boost my ego, and then I carry it on from there into other aspects of my life, feeling good about it ... Sometimes, I take my brief case home with stuff to do at home, but I have other projects I do at home. I try to keep those [employment, family, and home] separate ... I'm a career-oriented person. I have a career. I'm a professional woman.

As these women illustrate, some who structured their roles hierarchically interwove characteristics of their primary role through their other roles, whereas others viewed their hierarchically organized roles as separate but not disconnected from valued relationships. What they held in common was the salience of one role over others in the overall identity structure.

Our second and third research questions asked whether employed women and stay-at-home women differed in their role-related identity structures, and whether employed women with careers and women employed in noncareer positions differ in their identity structures. As shown in Table 3, a significant relationship was found between vocational status and primary role identification,  $\chi^2(3, n = 36) = 14.00, p = .003$ . Almost half of the women with hierarchical role-related identity structures (47%;  $n = 17$ ) defined themselves primarily through their employment role. An even higher proportion (71%;  $n = 15$ ) of the 21 career women in the hierarchical category defined themselves primarily through their employment role, one-sample goodness-of-fit,  $\chi^2(2, n = 21) = 13.71, p = .001$ . The 8 noncareer women did not exhibit this pattern, and instead were equally likely to primarily identify themselves through their employment, mother, wife, or homemaking

**TABLE 3****Primary Roles in the Hierarchical Role Identity Structure**

| <i>Primary Role</i> | <i>Career</i> | <i>Noncareer</i> | <i>Stay-at-Home</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|---------------------|---------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Employment          | 15            | 2                | 0                   | 17           |
| Mother              | 3             | 2                | 6                   | 11           |
| Wife                | 3             | 3                | 0                   | 6            |
| Homemaking          | 0             | 1                | 1                   | 2            |
| Total               | 36            | 21               | 8                   | 36           |

roles,  $\chi^2(3, n = 8) = 1.00, p = .801$ . The majority (86%;  $n = 6$ ) of the 7 stay-at-home women primarily identified through their mother role (although due to the small sample size, the probability of this finding did not exceed chance,  $\chi^2[1, n = 7] = 3.57, p = .06$ ).

*Holistic role-related identity structure.* The six women in the holistic role-related identity structure category were similar to Marks and MacDermid's (1996) description of individuals with balanced role-related identity structures. The responses of these women indicated that all of their roles were important and enjoyable. They evaluated their role performances positively. A part-time attorney commented:

[Being a wife] affects everything ... Being a wife affects my entire life. It affects how I spend my time, the choices that I make ... [Being a mother has] a very positive effect. I feel like I'm a much more complete person than before I had a child and I feel like I've met a real challenge. [Being a mother affects] nearly everything I do...[Being an attorney] defines who I am to a great extent ... It's extremely important to me that I have a role in society outside that of just mother and wife ... I take homemaking seriously ... [Being a homemaker] is real important to me. I feel like I can be a great lawyer, but I would feel like a failure as a mother and a wife if I weren't a good homemaker.

As shown in Table 2, career, noncareer, and stay-at-home women were equally likely to be classified as having holistic role-related identity structures. Although most of the women in the holistic classification were employed (83%;  $n = 5$ ), a one-sample goodness-of-fit chi-square test indicated that the difference between the numbers of employed and stay-at-home women in the holistic role-related identity structure category was not significant,  $\chi^2(1, n = 6) = 2.667, p = .102$ .

*Multirole role-related identity structure.* The eight women in the multirole role-related identity structure classification combined characteristics of the hierarchical and holistic groups. These women discussed two or three roles as equally important, inseparable sources of role-related identity. However, these women in-

icated that their primary role clusters were more significant to their sense of self than were their other roles. Thus, these women evidenced some similarity to women in both the holistic role-related identity structure group and the hierarchical role-related identity structure group. The role combinations for women in the multirole role-related identity category are shown in Table 4.

The intertwining of primary roles for women in the multirole role-related identity classification was exemplified by a self-employed woman who saw her wife and mother roles as inextricably linked: “It’s a total picture to me. It’s hard to separate being a wife and a mother.” A stay-at-home woman said, “I can’t imagine not being a mother. In fact, I can’t imagine not being a wife.” For these women, other role-related identity components were less important than were their wife and mother role identifications. In another case, a nurse practitioner saw her work and homemaking roles as not being as important to her as her wife and mother roles. “Work is not as important as my family [wife and mother roles], but it’s pretty important. . . . [Homemaking] is one of those things that comes with the territory.”

Four of the eight women in the multirole role-related identity structure classification made statements indicating that they were attempting to balance their most important roles. A woman who was self-employed in a business with her husband indicated the need for balance when she said, “I feel like as a wife, I have to help find the balance between our working life and our personal life.” Many of the women who made statements of this type did not want to lower their personal standards for their performance of family and homemaker roles or to allow their employment role to harm their families. A part-time substitute teacher reached for balance by reframing her concept of her career: “Homemaking is my life’s work . . . I feel I have to provide for the health of the kids and right now that’s the focus of my life.” An information specialist illustrated the tension she felt in balancing work and family in this remark:

I’ve been thinking about [the family] for the last couple of days. It’s such a bad statement that we have to spend the majority of our time away from people that are in our

**TABLE 4**

Frequency Of Multi-Role by Vocational Status

| <i>Multirole Identity</i> | <i>Career</i> | <i>Noncareer</i> | <i>Stay-at-Home</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|---------------------------|---------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Mother–Wife               | 1             | 0                | 1                   | 2            |
| Mother–Work               | 0             | 1                | 0                   | 1            |
| Wife–Work                 | 2             | 0                | 0                   | 2            |
| Wife–Mother–Homemaker     | 1             | 1                | 0                   | 2            |
| Wife–Mother–Work          | 1             | 0                | 0                   | 1            |
| Total                     | 5             | 2                | 1                   | 8            |

family and that bothers me because we should have family around us the majority of our time and work the minority. We're out doing other things and I see my kids about three or four hours a day and that bothers me. Not that I don't love the people I work with, but they're not family but they tend to become a second family to you. Family is very important. It is the one group that you can identify so closely with.

In elaborating on the intertwining of roles, a few women indicated that their attempt at balancing some of their roles allowed them to feel more complete. A professor explained, "I think [work] gives me some sort of definition of myself, that I don't want to be just a wife, and I don't want to be just an employee either." The self-employed woman illustrated the meaningfulness of multiple roles in her comment concerning wife, mother, and employment roles:

I think [being a wife] helps me have a better rounded personality, and that's hard to define, except that what I've experienced being a wife helps me in the other things that I do ... I think that [being a wife] has helped in the business aspect and working with employees ... [Being a mother] adds another dimension to everything I do. When I'm dealing with employees that we have working for us, at times I may say, 'Now I'm going to take off the employer's hat and I'm going to talk to you like a mother'.

The information specialist suggested that maintaining a multirole role-related identity structure was challenging:

It does bother me sometimes that I don't play the traditional wife role, that I don't stay home all day long and cook and clean and have this supper waiting for him ... It does bother me but then again, I think I would hate it. I want a job that's going to pay me for eight hours a day when I only work four outside the home because I want to be with my family, and I want to be with my kids, and I want to be there when [my husband] needs me in a certain social situation.

Most of the employed women who sought balance in their roles gained intrinsic rewards from their jobs and were also motivated by financial considerations in their pursuit of waged work. A creative director commented about her employment role:

This job satisfies for me everything a job should, but I also seek the things that I know will give me satisfaction. When I took this job, we were \$25,000 in the hole. The initial satisfaction was that most people didn't think I could do this, and I have ... I don't dislike being [underpaid] that much because my salary has enabled us. [My husband] does not make a lot of money, even though people think bankers do, and he was without a job for a year and a half. It took all of our savings. If I had worked full-time all these years, we would have been in a much better fix. I can see where a second salary is really nice. Having a second salary enables us to go [out to eat] and not feel guilty.

Although a significant majority (88%;  $n = 7$ ) of the women in the multi-role classification were employed,  $\chi^2(1, n = 8) = 4.50, p = .034$  (see Table 2), a

one-sample goodness-of-fit chi-square test indicated that the women in this group were equally distributed across the career, noncareer, and stay-at-home categories,  $\chi^2(2, n = 8) = 3.25, p = .197$ .

*Unembedded.* Two women, one stay-at-home and one career, were rated as having unembedded role-related identity structures. Both women indicated that they were “more than their roles” and did not mention balancing roles or identifying with one more than the others. For example, the homemaker said, “I am also another person besides a mother ... [Being a mother] always left me to be my own person.” This type of self-perception appeared to be an act of resistance to social expectations, as evidenced by a full-time attorney’s comment about her roles:

I am an individual, I do have a role as a wife, I do have a role as a mother, and a role as an attorney, but I’m only a person, I’m the ultimate judge of those different roles that I have ... I am not a homemaker ... I don’t think [work role] really affects how I feel about myself ... Being an individual that my children see as a human being, not just as a mother ... [The wife role does] not much affect [how I feel about myself].

An attorney also commented on her perceptions of herself: “I’m not overly concerned with what other people think about what I do, although I do need some reassurance and social acceptance, but really, I basically live life by my yardstick.”

*Identity transition.* Eight women were classified as not having clearly structured role-related identities. These women appeared to be in a state of moratorium (Josselson, 1987; Marcia, 1993) or transition (Kroger & Green, 1996; Levinson, 1996) in which they were trying to make sense of their lives. A homemaker who was classified as in identity transition said:

I don’t feel that being a wife has any permanent kind of influence on my self-image that I’m aware ... I have found that [the mother role] is very deeply satisfying ... I also find it [very] difficult ... [Being a homemaker is] not as important as relationships. I think housework is a stone drag, and I think training children in housework is even worse ... I did some thinking during it [the interview]. It’s difficult because I’m going through such a shift in relationships after my mother’s death. Some of these things [roles] are hard for me to sort through, and I’m not sure I’ve given very valid [answers]. I’m sure [that] if I were interviewed again in a year, I might give very different [answers].

Most of the women in the transition classification were unhappy with at least one role, either their mother, wife, or employment role, and wanted to make changes. A caseworker aide discussed her situation:

I get no satisfaction from the job ... I have tried going to school last semester. I don’t have the time to do it the way it should be done, and I have priorities ... My children are really at the age where they need me at least at nighttime, and I don’t have them all day

long ... Before I didn't have the money financially to go and now I do have the money, but I don't have the time ... It would shortchange everyone so I haven't undertaken it [college education] at this time ... [My office job] is just so stable ... and now I have a [office job] but now they have openings [in the field], and I'm being interviewed for it, and I don't know if I want to go back out there again ... I'm caught with nowhere to go, and I realize that if I was more educated, I would be able to [find a] spot.

Some were beginning to take tentative steps in making changes, such as the elementary school teacher who has just received her master's degree and administration certificate:

[My husband is willing] to give me every opportunity to do what I want to do ... in the administrative area and someday to be a consultant ... I expect to put in a couple years as a teacher [in the city in which we are relocating].

Others were examining their options and deciding whether to make changes, such as the professor who was struggling in her marriage:

In terms of my husband, at least after Christmas this year I told him I was seriously considering a divorce ... I'm not feeling real positive about things ... but that doesn't mean that I don't think that we can work out along the way ... Either there are going to be some changes or we get a divorce.

Two women had reflected on their roles and felt that they needed to move from being work oriented to being more family oriented. These women were attempting to develop plans to make the changes they felt they needed to make. One woman, another schoolteacher, believed that she had harmed the family by focusing on work:

From the way I can see my husband changing, if he keeps on the way he is, I think we're going to get closer, more friendly. I think everything is going to get much better, and I think I will be more of a wife and less of a worker because to me, a wife is doing all the home stuff, and I really enjoy that and don't enjoy that much going out to work ... [Work] is not as important as it used to be. It used to be very important ... to the detriment of my family I realize now ... Usually women, they go to work and they still have their family in the back of their mind. Men don't, and when I go to work I feel like that. I just block out everything, and once in a while, if I've got a big problem, it'll come through if I have a minute.

Similarly, a nurse who has a toddler at home was in the process of changing priorities to ensure that the family was not harmed by her work:

When I was managing for the last seven years, my free time was spent reading journals, reading books, writing papers for a potential article for a journal, or putting classes together to teach my subordinates. My time now will be spent very similarly but geared down a bit ... As far as a change in my nursing profession as a whole, down



the road I'd like to work part-time so I can spend more time with my family ... My priorities have already changed. My family comes first before my career, which it didn't before. My career has always been first, [husband and child] have been kind of nip and tuck for the first place ... I just think that deep inside there is still that career orientation that I have to work through.

A one-sample goodness-of-fit chi-square test also indicated that there were no significant distributional differences of women in transition among the vocational status categories,  $\chi^2 (2, n = 8) = 1.00, p = .61$ .

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we investigated women's role-related identity structures through in-depth interviews with 60 employed and stay-at-home women married to professional men. The employment, wife, mother, and homemaking roles of these women were examined to understand how married women structure employment and family roles within their identity. The sample, although relatively homogeneous and composed of White, middle-class women, permitted an exploratory investigation of several questions regarding how women arrange their role-related identity structures.

First, we asked what role-related identity structures are characteristic of contemporary employed and stay-at-home married women. The findings in this study demonstrated that contemporary adult women can and do organize their role-related identities in diverse ways. Four distinct structures suggested by previous research, plus an additional transitional status, were identified. Analysis of the interview transcripts suggested that the women in the four role-related identity categories were equally satisfied with their identity component structuring, whereas those in the transitional status were dissatisfied with at least some of their identity components.

Our findings also indicated that most women (60%) arranged their role-related identities hierarchically, giving priority to one role. This appeared to be true of women in all vocational categories. However, another substantial proportion of women (26%) described alternative organizations of balancing or integrating their role-related identities, or distinguishing their identity from their roles. This finding suggests that both structural and expansionist approaches to role-related identity research are useful, especially when used conjointly to facilitate the detection of multiple types of organizations.

Our second question asked whether employed women and stay-at-home women differed in their role-related identity structures. Among those who ordered roles hierarchically, the majority of career women (71%) were primarily invested in their employment role-related identity, whereas the majority of stay-at-home women (86%) were primarily invested in their role as mother. Noncareer women

with a hierarchical role structure were distributed across all categories (employment, mother, wife, and homemaker). However, closer examination of the data also indicated that how women with a hierarchical role-related identity structure viewed the relationship between their employment and family roles often depended on which roles were given primary importance. Many of the women who gave priority to a family-related role (wife, mother, or homemaker) saw themselves as bringing characteristics associated with their primary role into play in their other roles. Often they stated that their employment role was enhanced by characteristics they associated with their family-related primary role. However, women who indicated that their employment role was most important typically did not talk about interweaving their roles. Instead, they tended to define the employment and family dimensions of their role-related identities as separate from one another. In other words, these latter women indicated that the importance they placed on their employment role did not affect their investment and performance in their family roles, nor did family roles influence their job commitment or performance. These distinctions probably represent personal settlements with particular gender-role-related societal expectations. Despite changes in the rates of female employment in the past four decades, women still are expected to place a high value on family roles and to commit themselves to homemaking and caregiving. Women who give priority to a family-related role and bring traditional feminine characteristics such as nurturance and caring into their workplace roles can maintain continuity in their role-related identity structures by blending their perceptions of role performances in the two domains. However, women who give priority to their employment and bring traditional career-associated characteristics such as competitiveness and efficiency into their family roles are likely to be seen and to see themselves as devaluing their families. Thus, these women can best maintain the integrity of their role-related identity structures by ensuring that they see their commitment to and performance in work and family domains as distinct and noncompetitive.

We also asked whether employed women who have careers and women who are employed in noncareer positions differ in their identity structures. In this study, the career women were distinguished from the noncareer women by the extent to which they indicated that their employment role was more meaningful to how they saw themselves than the other roles in their identity structures. This finding could be seen as lending credence to the notion that at least some career women abandon the traditional gender-role expectation for primary or exclusive identification with home and family (or both). However, great caution should be exercised in drawing such a conclusion. A number of these women emphasized the meaningfulness of mother or wife even though they perceived their employment role to be more valuable to them.

Furthermore, 29% of the career women who organized their role-related identities hierarchically gave priority to the wife or mother role. Three of the five career women in the multirole category gave equal priority to employment and at least

one family role, and three career women organized their role-related identities holistically. In addition, two noncareer women gave priority to employment in their role-related identity structures. In essence, based on the data in this study in which women spoke in depth about their priorities, it is reasonable to conclude that women exhibit diverse role-related identity structures, and any blanket statements regarding their disidentification with family roles would be unwarranted and incorrect.

In addition to addressing our major questions, this study allowed for a closer look at the alternative arrangements of role-related identity structures exhibited by women in our sample. For example, women classified in the *holistic* identity category expressed enjoyment of all their roles, believed all their roles were equally important, and indicated that all their roles provided meaning in how they perceived themselves. This group appeared to exhibit an identity structure similar to that described in previous research as a form of balanced role structure (Marks & MacDermid, 1996). Women in our *multirole* role-related identity category were similarly distinguished from others in the sample by the emphasis they placed on balancing the roles on which they placed the greatest priority. These women talked about the ways in which keeping their role-related commitments balanced made them feel complete. In other words, role balancing for them was a tool for maintaining the integrity of their role-related identity structure.

Our initial impression of the two women in the *unembedded* category was that they might be withdrawn from social connections, but careful examination of their interview responses indicated otherwise. They drew satisfaction from involvement in and performance of their social roles, but they resisted defining themselves through that involvement and performance. They recognized and acknowledged social role constraints and expectations, but marched, happily, it seems, to their own drumbeat. Their responses indicated that they had, in the past, explored other ways of organizing their roles, but found that the best solution for them was to ignore social constructions and expectations embedded in roles. They created their own criteria for evaluating themselves and had committed to living a life based on these standards.

This is not to say that these women did not experience frustration in their lives. They did. However, we ultimately concluded that these two middle-aged respondents fit the description of psychosocial maturity identified by other adult development theorists and researchers (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Gould; 1978; Kegan, 1982; Labouvie-Vief et al., 1995), even though our measures differed from those used in other studies. We want to emphasize, however, that despite our description of this classification as psychosocially mature, we found no evidence to suggest that this role-related identity structure was more satisfying or adaptive than other organizations.

Finally, an important proportion of women (13%) in this study were in *transition* and were actively revising their investments and commitments with respect to

their role-related identity. All of these women, who were evenly distributed across the three vocational categories, were somewhat dissatisfied with their role-related priorities and evaluated themselves in less-than-positive, although not distinctly negative, terms. These women had made or anticipated making changes in their priorities and conveyed a shifting and unstable sense of role-related identity. In view of findings by other researchers that a certain number of people fluctuate in their identity commitments as they move through their adult years (Archer, 1990; Waterman & Archer, 1990) or never consolidate identity commitments (Josselson, 1987, 1996), we expected to find some women in the sample to be in the *transition* category. The fact that we did find women who were not adequately characterized by either structural or expansionist approaches highlights the importance of open-ended methods of study for detecting subtle or unexpected distinctions of variation in adult samples. Fortunately, the interview schedule enabled us to distinguish these women from those with seemingly stable role-related identity structures. Future research should distinguish women who are in transition from those who have integrated role-related identity. Further investigation of women in this category, especially longitudinal research, would enrich our understanding of how women reorganize themselves as they move through adulthood and would enhance the literature on role-related identity structure.

In conclusion, although this study provided answers to our questions about women's role-related identity structures, it also raised new issues. We found that the women in our study were able to provide the in-depth information we sought about the significance of their employment and family roles for their sense of personal identity, thus adding to a small but growing knowledge base describing how a sense of self is composed and maintained across diverse role investments such as those available to contemporary middle-class women. Future studies can enlarge the picture created by the women in our study by investigating the role-related identity structures of women from other social strata, including poor women or those in working-class families. Women with non-White racial or ethnic identifications could further inform us with respect to how an additional layer of social identity impacts role-related identity. Finally, although assertions have been casually made about differences in how men and women structure their role-related identities, these differences have yet to be systematically investigated. As more women and men tell us about the organization and meaning of their adult roles to their sense of a coherent self, appreciation of the intricate construction of adults' personal identities will surely grow.

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